



Party Time in New Van Peebles' Film

It's Saturday night party time as some of the gang get it together in a scene from Melvin Van Peebles' new musical comedy "Don't Play Us Cheap", now in the second week of its World Premiere engagement at the Coronet Theater. Those in the cast shown above are L-R, Esther Rolle (in Atlanta last week for the opening night Premiere Benefit for the Southern Elections Fund, Inc.) Bobby Dunn, Joshie Jo Armistead (ribbon in hair), and Tom Anderson.

'DON'T PLAY US CHEAP' DRAWS RAVING REVIEW

BY ALEXIS SCOTT LEWIS

After viewing Melvin Van Peebles' new musical-comedy, "Don't Play Us Cheap," one brother in the movie audience leaned over to the person sitting next to him and said, "Say, did you see this movie from the beginning?" "Yes," came the reply. Then the brother said, "Well, I came in late and must have missed something. What was it about?" The person then replied, "I'm not sure what it said, but it must be heavy."

Melvin Van Peebles has come up with a movie so simple and so subtle that it leaves its unsuspecting audience baffled and uncertain about what has gone down up there on the magic silver screen.

The Saturday night party time, as stated in the foreword dedication of the flick lays it out plain and simple: This movie is dedicated to black people everywhere, and Saturday night, our night, and black people who party on Saturday night.

From then on, Van Peebles' sensitive perception of the Soul of Black folks, his reaction to and through the black experience and his creative genius takes over. The vehicle Van Peebles uses to trip us out is a Saturday night party at Sister Maybell's in Harlem with supernatural party crashers sent by the devil himself. Brother Rat introduces the party and its guests and warns of

the intruding imps from the devil, but we are hardly prepared for what unfolds. In the midst of all the supernatural, diabolical scheming of the imps and the good timing and eating and drinking of the party folks, we are every few minutes swept up in a song. And we remember, this is a musical!

Each guest at the party comes in direct contact and conflict with the imps, Trinity and David, who have taken the form of "colored people" to attend the party in order to "break it." Trinity and David do everything they can think of to "break that party." But to their surprise and dismay, the party folks are not in the least disturbed or annoyed by their ignorant attempts. Trying to drink all the liquor---impossible, everybody knows that everybody brings liquor and its impossible to run out; trying to eat all the sandwiches on the table---doesn't matter, the real food is still cooking in the kitchen; attempting to expose who's sleeping with whom---everybody knows about Sister Bowser and Brother Washington.

Finally, Trinity is overwhelmed by these humans at this Saturday night party. He no longer enjoys being mean, nor takes pride in his evil ways. Instead he wishes to convert to being human, and colored permanently, to enjoy the company of Sister Maybell's niece.

David, older and more sinister and later to arrive

at the party than Trinity, is not swayed. David is determined, and continues to do his damndest to "break that party." Without success, David turns himself into a cockroach to make his escape before it's too late and he has to remain human and "colored."

But when Sister Maybell's spies that cockroach scampering across the kitchen floor.--SMASH!--. Then cockroaches know better than to fool with Sis Maybell. You let one of them devils get a foot hold in your house and they just take over. You got to smash that devil."

The party and the movie, are a combination of allegorical sketches interwoven with classic expressions of urban black ghetto lifestyles. In one segment, Sister Washington, who has a church moaning - Aretha Franklin - Melba Moore, singing style, responds to music on the record player by saying, "Oh yeah, m-m-m-huh, that's my song." She then goes into a full fledged rendition of "You cut up the clothes in the closet of my dreams," and obvious parade of rhythm and blues, but so real and intense, that we can dig where she's coming from. In another, brother Washington, who looks like he could be anybody's uncle, is rapping about not having sore hands from picking cotton, but complaining about a bad case of "red cap's back." He then, just as naturally, moves into a powerful number about the four things that matter in

this life: "A picture of my mother. Sweet, sweet Lucy, the cap'n's boots, and quittin' time."

In another sequence, the uppity Johnson's arrive at the party late, of course, as the tolerated guests, Mr. Johnson, who "works for the government," (he's a mailman).

Mrs. Johnson, who constantly complains of a "very delicate stomach," is known to stuff herself at all parties, and their son Harold, "the collegiate" are harassed by David from the time they arrive. Having their every pretention exposed, they leave the party in a huff behind David's insults. The whole party laughs and congratulates David as being "the first person ever to tell the Johnson's off. The Johnsons are all right, but they're such hypocrites."

Van Peebles has put together an incredible mixture of fantasy and reality. In spite of the fact that "don't play us cheap" is a movie made from a musical-comedy play, it comes across. All though the lyrics are less than inspired, the message is not. In the words of Sister Maybell, to her niece, "Listen to your heart, child. Know what's in your heart and do what it says."

Because the editing of the film is sometimes snatchy and clumsy, the movie seems long. And sometimes slow, because all the action takes place in Sister Maybell's two room apartment and all the action is dialogue and songs. However, Van Peebles makes good use of some old standard special effects techniques. He gives the imps hellum voices and flapping bat wings before they take human form. The best is a dashiki clad rat, who comes out of a hole in Sister Maybell's apartment wall to give the opening and closing remarks a-

indicative to success, and Melvin Van Peebles is suc-

in terms of money, but in the reality of life.

Peebles has traveled the world not to lose his identity, but to embellish upon it. The material he writes isn't written by chance, but reflects the life style of Black people.

THE LIFE STYLE of Black folks isn't of shackles and chains anymore, but of a new kind of slavery, a sort of nice and pleasant kind of slavery. It seems as if every nigger wants to become a member of the credit card game, or the self-oppression do it yourself kit.

Again it seems as though Black folks have elongated the routines of our Black relatives from days of old. Even today we work from sunup to sundown.

Friday and Saturday come but once a week, but in those two nights Black folks unwind from a work week of 'get up' to Friday and Saturday nights of 'get down' to some heavy parteeing.

WE HAVE a great warmth in us, as Black people," said Peebles. "We have this determination to live under tremendous odds. Just because we laugh, don't play us cheap."

That is the name of his award winning play, "Don't Play Us Cheap," now showing at the New Locust Theater. It's a play for ages eight thru eighty can enjoy about some down home folks.

When viewing the play, one has the tendency to nudge his or her friend sitting next to them, and in a low whisper, say, "You know something, don't that remind you of somebody?" "Who?" said the friend. "Your mother," retorted the other friend.

YES INDEED, there are characters in the play, "Don't Play Us Cheap" that remind Black folks of somebody they know because it's a window of Black folks having a good time on Saturday night.



ACTRESS AND ACTOR, Sandra Phillips and Frank Carey, kid around during rehearsal break of "Don't Play Us Cheap," showing at the New Locust Theater.

Van Peebles has taken the everyday groans in the lives of Black people and written them down. The hard part was trying to tie it together so that a dude can look at it as a play or movie and laugh at himself or sit there and get mad and tell the person next to him, "You know he's got-damn-right!"

WHAT ARE GROANS (for those colored persons of ails? Groans for example are times when you're standing on a corner looking down the street and a cop drives up and tells you to get off the corner. Where else can you wait for the damn bus? Van Peebles says if you're standing you're loitering.

Isn't it possible that Black people who are running down the street could be running to something and not from something?

Van Peebles again says, "If you're running you're escaping, if you're walking you're prowling, it just don't make no sense . . ." These are groans that one feels and



MELVIN VAN PEEBLES RAPS About The Real Things

have come to accept as an everyday occurrence.

VAN PEEBLES talked about white critics and how they sometimes can not understand the written material, be it a play or movie. "I read about it in other reviews not just mine," said the talented playwright.

He went on to say that these white so-called critics will take the position of defining what reality is. Van Peebles said, "I don't need the white man to define my reality. And furthermore have you noticed when the Anglo-Saxon refers to reality as 'The Reality' instead of 'A Reality,' there's a difference? In his arrogance he assumes if he does not understand-it is not so."

MELVEN VAN PEEBLES is not a cosmetic Black who will patronize you to spare your feelings if you are standing on his hand with spike shoes. He will tell you point blank, "You damn right it hurts and you got less than a second to get the hell off my hand." Maybe this is the reason why Van Peebles hasn't been seen on TV panels and talk shows, or even the famous "Sixty Minutes."

When one shys away from making positive statements such as, I am great or I agree with you absolutely, I am the best, the feeling of avoidance sets in or embarrassment or that he or she is crazy. It is this positiveness that very few Blacks project. Rev. Jesse Jackson's "I am Somebody," or Ali's "I'm The Greatest," or Van Peebles' statement on the "Today" show, when Barbara Walters referred to Mel as one of the great Black playwrights, Melvin corrected her by saying, "I am the greatest Black playwright."

Shyness and to cover are indicative to one another and one becomes an authority on the everyday groans. On the other hand positiveness is indicative to success, and Melvin Van Peebles is suc-